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AFTER-THOUGHTS OF A STORY-TELLER.

BY GEORGE W. CABLE.

THE author of a few novels not among the “hundred most popular” drops his pencil upon his tablet in the joy of having finished another. To him this is achievement, and triumph and rest are as sweet to the feeble as to the strong. Finished, he says. A score or two of magazine pages have yet to be written, and he feels he must write them while he is still vibrating to the key of the story’s chords; but to-morrow will serve for this beginning of the end, since he has now only to elaborate what is fully planned, to consummate what fate—or art, the two are one—has at last clearly ordained. Such a moment tempts the story-maker to reminiscence and makes the how-do-you-do-it of a reader almost as flattering as the how-do-you-do of a princess—or publisher. Yet it is not proposed here to tell how novelists go about their work or, indeed, to enter into heavy explanation of anything.

The first impulse toward the production of a novel—does it have to be inspiration? I think not. If it be inspiration—whatever that is—it is more apt to be an inspiration of the will than of the constructive imagination. The word of the muse may come unto me saying, Write; but it will probably never say more until I sit down in the spirit of a toiler, saying, What shall I write? I know one writer who even for a short story has sat for weeks in feline patience and tension at the mouse-hole of his constructive powers, knowing only that the inspiration was in there and had got to come out. Inspiration does sometimes come with *almost* inexplicable spontaneity; but if it does not come with hard hammering of the brain, it comes after it; never before, so far as this writer knows.

The primary impulse toward my first sustained novel was an

ambition kindled by the unexpected invitation of a magazine's editors. The next was the good-morning word of a sanguine friend. I can still hear him calling down the stairway from the door of his office: "Begin it! Never mind how it's to come out; you have abundant invention; trust to that." And, if I remember aright, the story was written without a single preliminary memorandum of its scheme.

Yet I had a scheme clearly in mind; a scheme in which one of the first things decided was how the tale should end. For the rest it consisted mainly in a choice and correlation of the characters I designed to put upon my stage. The plot was not laboriously planned. It was to be little more than the very old and familiar one of a feud between two families, the course of true love fretting its way through, and the titles of hero and heroine open to competition between a man and his friend for the one and a mother and daughter for the other. Upon this well-used skeleton I essayed to put the flesh and blood, the form and bloom, of personalities new to the world of fiction. To do this and to contrive a plausible variety of scenes and incidents that should secure to these children of the fancy the smiling acquaintance of the reading world, were far more than a sufficient tax on the supposed redundancy of my powers of invention. That fountain never overflowed. It dribbled steadily, and from then till now it has rarely done more. To-morrow, always to-morrow, it will; surely it will! But it never does.

If slowness only meant excellence! Speed is bad, yes; the best tales are not by the swiftest writers; and yet the product of nearly all the best story-writers has been abundant. Forgive the sigh—but I have never heard of any story-producing pen so slow as the one here writing. The novel it is just completing stands for nearly eighteen months of work and was begun three years ago. Perhaps it is as well for everybody that not all the novelists are "abundant in invention." Those who write five or six hundred ten-word lines per day when they write, surely must spend long periods without writing at all. If I could write two hundred lines a day I should write four novels a year!

Death early took from me the generous prompter of my stimulating delusion. It is very pleasant, this opportunity to speak of him with sincere gratitude. He helped me to make a very valuable mistake. To be emboldened by his compliments

was easy, for he was a distinguished physician, of high literary attainments, and had been the friend of Pinckney, Timrod, and William Gilmore Sims. I never put more than a hint or two of him into any fictional character, but his partner, a man of more picturesque idiosyncracies, became Doctor Sevier.

I wrote occasional short stories for three years before essaying a twelve-months serial, and they were a good stepping-stone. Yet sometimes now they bother me. While I may be writing a novel the best way I know how, some pertinent, or even impertinent, short story will haunt my elbow, saying, "Put me in, too." But I know better. "I have study that out," as the model for Narcisse really used to say. Somebody awhile ago started the notion that it is as difficult and creditable to write a short story as a sustained novel. Oh, my! Is a little boat as hard to build as a big ship? Is a melody as great a musical achievement as a symphony? One does not quite prove or disprove his talent for the long story by succeeding or failing with the short one; and still, until he has given the short one a thorough trial, he had better let the long one alone. But literary beginners show an inordinate tendency to attack the long story first. However, better that than to let a short story into a long one. It is almost sure to prove a parasite.

Whether a long story has ever embraced one, and only one, short story without some damage, I have not read enough to know, but only to doubt. The question is, possibly, more curious than important. A single long story made of several short ones is perfectly practicable, but is it ever its author's best? Not often, I think. I tried this in *Bonaventure*. The pastoral nature of the subject favored the scheme, and I am not sure that I need regret the outcome. But once is enough, and the novel I am now finishing has at least this claim on my hopes: that it is one story, and only one.

In *The Grandissimes*—three syllables, yes, not four—there is a short story, to and around which the whole larger work is built. It is the episode of Bras-Coupé, which was written much as it stands before the novel was begun. I do not know that any one has ever resented this piece of incorporation, yet I mention it to disclaim all present approval of such methods. The only method I know by experience to be worse is the expanding of a *true* story into a novel, which I did in *Doctor Sevier*. Fact and fiction are

twin handmaidens of truth, but the man who takes them both to wife at once will not get the best of either. I have not done it since, and shall never do it again. But how easy and pleasant are contrition and confession when one has no further use for his sin!

Certain authors are often congratulated upon their having "discovered a new field." The congratulators really mean not a field in which no one, or dozen, have tried to write before, but only a field in which no one before has reaped large success. Truth is, the only discovery worth making in this direction is not a new field of romance with geographical or chronological boundaries, but the fact that the field of romance is wherever man is, and its day every day; that wherever in place or time there is room—and where in the habitable earth is there not?—for wars of the heart against environment, circumstance, and its own treasons, there is the story-teller's field; and though old as Nineveh or as hard trodden as Paris, it will be, to his readers, just as fresh or stale, as small or great, as his individual genius, and no more. He may draw attention for a while to his new field of time and place; but if that is all, or the most of him and his work, his literary remains will not live. They will barely fossilize.

The plot of the novel I am just completing is, I believe, more my own than any I have before put into a sustained work; but its field, as to time and place, though both early and lately familiar to me, is not mine by any right of first discovery or occupancy. Possibly the work may prove all the worse for this. If so, I have made my own bed and must lie on it, and if I perish, I perish. Why not? A writer, as a writer, cannot die till his time comes; and if it ought to come soon, where is the gain in filibustering for postponements? Least of all ought any "field" to save him, except the field of his own inner gifts.

We have spoken of a novel whose end is in sight, scarcely fifty pages away, as though the rest of the journey were easy. It is, and it isn't. For as the writer looks forward to the final conflict of passions, endeavors, and destinies to which his complicated correlation of imagined lives and loves has brought him, he knows that he has got to suffer and enjoy it all—all! before he can so produce it on the page that what he writes shall stay written. Great is sentiment. For sentiment is but good Latin for feeling, and feeling is living. But despicable is sentimentality, which, even when

it is not a conscious lie, is at best but a feeling after feeling. If only—to mention an extreme case—if only the average reporter would perceive this and cease to load his columns with periods which, because unfelt by himself, suffocate the emotions he seeks to arouse! No author, from whatever heaven, earth, or hell of actual environment he may write, can produce a living narrative of motives, passions, and fates without having first felt the most of it, and apprehended it all, in that invisible life which every man and woman, in degree, lives in and by the imagination.

Of course, the story-teller may find and use living models and will be grateful whenever fortune brings them to him; but when she does not, he has the memory of countless disembodied traits and whims, and, better still, he has himself. For let him find ever so complete a model, he can never make that model live again on the page of fiction by merely reporting him or her. He cannot, successfully, paste photographs into a novel. Whatever richness or sterility, baseness, beauty, or grotesqueness, of mind or soul, the exigencies of his story require him to portray, he is likely—he is bound—to find somewhere in himself, at last, his own best model; and as he lays down his pen at the conclusion of a long story he is forced to confess in his heart, “My name is Legion, for we are many.”

Models are good; notebooks are advantageous. I only say, out of my not too extensive experience, that the model within the author, and it only, is indispensable. As for notebooks, *Bonaventure* is my only fiction in which a well-filled notebook proved of any direct service. Some artists make sketches and then tear them up. What they cannot thereafter forget is all they need to remember. I fancy this is the only way I shall ever again be able to make a notebook useful. It is not sight the story-teller needs, but second sight. We do not need to have seen everything in order to feel it, but we do need to feel whatever we would have a reader see. My “Posson Jone” (Parson Jones) is made entirely without a model, while his friend Jules St. Ange is made from two, one for his moral theories and one for his sunny presence. In *Madame Delphine*, only her daughter, not she, nor Père Jerome nor any other character, is drawn with reference to a living model. In *Bonaventure* the hero and Tarbox are portraits—not photographs, I hope,—while the curé of Carancro, made with no model either in sight or memory, turned out to be a surprising

likeness, in person, traits, and life, of a parish priest laboring within fifteen miles of the place, whom I have had the honor to meet, but whom I had never seen or heard of till after the story was printed. It was the Bonaventure of actual life, not of the novel, who cried to me :

“Some people say that Victor Hugo is an in-fiddle. Oh, sir, sir!—he—he perspires religion!”

And it was he, the actual, who, when told by Mr. Kemble, the illustrator, that he had been put into a book as an unmarried man, exclaimed in distress : “Sir, it must not be, for I am the fatheh of six chil’run !”

In *The Grandissimes* every prominent character is drawn from a model—including Frowenfeld—except Clotilde, who, I think, any reader will say, is both more real and more attractive than the apothecary. Aurore’s model was at least as beautiful and charming as she is portrayed, and in the same ways. I was once her next-door neighbor. A very ugly old line fence between us had either to be repaired or replaced, and I suggested a low, invisible lawn fence. She sweetly bade me suit my caprice entirely ; but the new fence was hardly in place before she erected, close against it, another, of feather-edged, hard pine boards, seven feet high.

In *Doctor Sevier*, Narcisse is partly from a model ; closely as to his graces, beauty, and philosophy ; but as to his moral shortcomings and sinuosities he is drawn from—ahem !—the author himself. Until he wrote the novel whose last number is still in his hands, the writer has never tried to portray a life-sized villain ; maybe he has not yet done so ; but he has never thus far drawn upon his own inner consciousness for a scamp and had his check dishonored. There’s something to be proud of !

For the man who holds their confirmation within himself models never spoil ; they keep like mummies. Mrs. March, in my new novel, is mainly the restoration of a person whom I have scarcely seen for twenty years. Of what use are models outside one’s self to a writer who cannot do without them ? You—the reader—you do without them. You say Shakspeare depicts remorse with amazing trueness. How do you know ? You never had remorse. And yet you do know. You know remorse by sight the moment he shows it to you, because when he holds the mirror up to nature he holds it up to your nature ; you can

waive experience. If you could know remorse without having to be shown it by either Shakspeare or experience—could feel it without having felt it—you would be Shakspeare, in degree ; as, in point of fact, you and all of us are, or even Shakspeare would have no readers. This is the way, if not the only way, in which it is true, as Mr. Drake has just said in his beautiful story of *The Yellow Globe*, that “only a man with a haunted heart can paint a haunted house.” Not actual experience, not actual observation, but the haunted heart ; that is what makes the true artist, of every sort. Now and then it even makes a critic.

On the other hand, the story-teller finds that what he reveals of himself comes not from that which is himself alone, but which is only, and recognizably, so many phases of the universal self. These he clothes in any idiosyncracies, whether of self or of others, which, as a cunning costumer, he finds will so drape them in the garments of individuality as not to conceal, but exaltedly to adorn, emphasize, and reveal, the humanity within. The artistic necessity that he should be wholly free to do this is what so often makes the marriage of fiction to biography an unhappy match. It is only in its eclectic use of the idiosyncratic that fiction needs to be fiction at all. In its presentments of the universal self it is as firmly bound by art as history is by morals, to be true to the very white of truth. Seest thou a man free in the one realm and faithful in the other ? He shall stand before kings ; he shall not stand before Sunday-school library committees.

These drafts of his art upon his own inner experience teach the novelist to see and reverence the romance and majesty, comedy and tragedy, of all the human life about him, through its numberless disguises of culture, of unculture, or of commonplace. For he soon discovers this odd yet most natural thing, that in drawing from those inexhaustible springs of the universal heart he will sometimes think the ascending bucket on the wheel is his own heart and find it is another's, or think it is another's and lo ! it is his own. We never know what we can do till we try, they say. Add this : Neither we nor our story-writing friend can half know what we are till he has put us into a story ; when, by virtue of his very fiction about us—his grotesque exaggeration of our idiosyncracies—we stand revealed. How many a true gentleman never suspected there was a whole Bartley Hubbard hid away in him until Howells nailed that fellow's ear to the public

whipping-post ! That good physician who, out of his own experience, told me the story of *Doctor Sevier*, never noticed that he was the true hero of it, nor did I, until I had begun to write it. True heroism does not see itself, any more than a good eye does ; nor does even our oculist notice what a good eye we have until he throws an extravagant light into it and searches it with a terrible goggle on his own. I never knew two such persons as old Manouvrier and his wife to have any such experience as that which makes my late short story, *The Taxidermist*. Nor did I remember that I had ever known two such characters at all, until a married pair—old friends—sent me their kind commendations, whereupon I instantly recognized in them the models whose spiritual likenesses I had unconsciously painted. Had they not spoken I might never have suspected them. They will never suspect themselves.

The larger work, whose end lies just before me in its first completeness, is full of model-drawn characters. It is time I turned back to it from this road to nowhere. What it is to be when it is too late to mend it, the writer cares, of course, immeasurably more than the reader. I wish I knew. But what I wish it were is this : A pleasing story of the heroic in imagined lives ; truth of the passions and affections, not advocated, but portrayed ; a book with every page good prose, and each of its chapters, as a chapter, good poetry ; a book able to keep you—not me, merely—always emotionally interested, and leave you profited ; a story written for all readers, to all, and at none. I should call that a good novel, but alas !——

G. W. CABLE.